

The Terma Tradition of the Nyingmapa School

TULKU THONDUP

People who have well-being of mind, even if the Buddha is not present, will receive Dharma from the midst of the sky, walls and trees. For those Bodhisattvas whose minds are pure, teachings and instructions will appear just by the wishes in their minds.

-Buddha¹

In a great number of spiritual traditions of the world there are many instances of the discovery of teachings and objects by mystical power. Similarly in various traditions and lineages of Buddhism, in India as well as Tibet, numerous discoveries of teachings and objects have been taken place.

In the Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism the tradition of concealment and revelations of teachings and materials of religious value through the mystical power of enlightened beings is most prevalent by far. This tradition of mystical discovery is known in Tibet as Ter (*gTer*, Treasures), Terma (*gTer-Ma*, Treasured Ones) or Tercho (*gTer-Chos*, Dharma Treasures or Treasured Teachings).

Ter do not belong to the category of revelations through psychic power (*rTsa Khams*) or through the beings of the spirit world (*Mi Ma-Yin*). Psychic discoveries take place through the power of mind, which is a gifted but conceptual cognition. Further, most spirits have more physical power and knowledge than ordinary human beings, but their spiritual wisdom and true virtues are limited. The discoveries of Terma take place from the omnipresent enlightened nature of the mind through the spontaneously arisen wisdom power of the enlightened nature itself whereas other discoveries are through dualistic concepts and supernatural deeds.

In Mahayana Buddhism in general and especially in Tantra the true nature of the universe is viewed as the ultimate peace, emptiness, openness, the enlightened, awakened state, bliss,

oneness, freedom from dualistic concepts and the wisdom of knowing all simultaneously, and that is known as the state of fully enlightened nature or the Buddha. Mahayanists including tantricks believe that the true nature of the mind of beings is pure as Buddha but that is has been obscured by wrong views, emotions and habits. We are distracted into dualistic phenomena and thus are trapped in the unending turmoil of the mundane world.

Haivajratantra says:

Beings are Buddha in their nature,
But their nature is obscured by adventitious defilements.
When the defilements are cleansed they themselves
are the very Buddha.

If you attain freedom from the mind of grasping at the selfless phenomena as "self" and transcend dualistic perception through spiritual trainings, then the whole universe before you merges into the oneness of great peace. And that is the attainment of Buddhahood, the absolute nature. If you attain Buddhahood, then every activity becomes the spontaneously arisen Buddha-action. All appear and are seen through the omniscient Buddha wisdom, as they are, simultaneously without discriminations, limitations and dualities. You see all through the all-knowing wisdom of Buddha nature, nor through the dualistic conceptual mind.

According to Buddhist tantras, in order to bring an ordinary person to the realization of the enlightened nature, it is very important for the person to receive the transmission of the power or blessing of the realization (*rTogs-Pa'i Byin-rLabs*) from a realized master. Then such a lineage of transmission moves through stages and times as the link to the realization, the true awakened nature, and as the means of communication of the teachings.

I am writing this article based on the interpretation of Ter tradition by the third Dodrupchen Rinpoche (1865-1926).²

The main source of the Terma tradition of the Nyingmapa school is Guru Padmasambhava. He was one of the greatest Tantric masters and saints of Buddhist history. In the 9th century A.C., at the invitation of king Trisong Deutsen of Tibet, he came to Tibet from India and fulfilled three major missions. First, through the display of spiritual power, he pacified the human and non-human forces who were obstructing the founding of Dharma in Tibet. Secondly, he brought Buddhism in general and especially the transmission of the teachings and blessing powers of tantra for his many Tibetan disciples and their followers. Thirdly, through his enlightened power he concealed numerous teachings and transmission as well as religious objects as *Ter* for the benefit of the future followers.

While transmitting esoteric teachings to his realized disciples in Tibet, Guru Padmasambhava concealed (*sBas*) many teachings with the blessings of his enlightened mind stream in the nature of the intrinsic awareness (*Rig-Pa*) of the minds of his disciples through the power of "mind-mandate transmission (*gTad-rGya*)", and thereby the master and disciple became united as one in the teachings and realization. Here, the master has concealed the teachings and blessings, the esoteric attainments, as *Ter* in the pure nature of the mind of his disciples through his enlightened power and has made aspirations that the *Ter* may be discovered for the sake of beings when the appropriate time comes. By the power of this method, which is called the mind-mandate transmission, the actual discoveries of the teachings take place. The mind-mandate transmission is the heart core of the *Ter* tradition of Guru Padmasambhava.

Then in succeeding centuries, when the time for benefiting beings with a particular teaching arrived, the reincarnations of the realized disciples of Guru Padmasambhava discovered those teachings which had been transmitted and concealed in them by the master in their past lives, through the power of the enlightened aspirations of the master and disciples and the good karmas beings. There are thousands of images, symbolic scripts, complete texts, medicinal material and ritual tools concealed by Guru Padmasambhava and discovered as *Ter* substances (*gTer-Dzas*), but the main *Ter* is the teachings and the blessings

transmitted through the minds of the disciples.

Transmission of Ter: The transmission of Ter has been channelled through six kinds or stages of lineages (*brGyud-Pa Drug*). Of the six lineages, three are identical to the lineage of general tantric transmissions in Nyingmapa scriptures. They are the lineage of transmission from "enlightened mind to enlightened mind among the Buddhas (*rGyal-Ba-dGongs brGyud*)", the lineage of transmission through mere "indications among the knowledge-holders (*Rig-'Dzin brDa-brGyud*)", and the lineage of "oral transmission among ordinary beings (*Gang-Zag sNyan-brGyud*)".

The next three lineages are unique to the Ter transmission, and the accomplishment of Ter discoveries are based on those transmissions. The first is "the transmission of aspirational empowerment (*sMon-Lam dBang-bsKur*)" or the "mind-mandate transmission" whereby, through his concentration of enlightened power, Guru Padmasambhava transmits and conceals the esoteric attainments and the teachings in the field of intrinsic awareness, the enlightened nature of the disciple's mind. This is the main aspect of the transmission. The second is the "transmission through prophetic authorization (*Lung-bsTan bKa'-Babs*)", in which the master inspires the disciple and gives prophecies concerning his becoming a Terton in the future. It is not just a foretelling of the future; rather, by his enlightened power, he makes the things happen that he prophesies. The third is "the entrustment to the dakinis (*mKha'- 'Gro gTad-rGya*)", in which the master entrusts the Ter, the Terton, the teachers and the followers of the tradition to the protection of the Dakinis and Dharma protectors. In the case of an Earth Ter, the master entrusts the objects, such as the caskets containing the yellow scrolls with symbolic scripts, to the Dakinis and Dharma protectors to keep them and hand them over to the Terton when the time comes. Thus, every Ter teaching is transmitted through the six types of transmission.

Two Major Categories of Ter: While Ter can be divided into eighteen categories and so on, there are two major categories of Ter based on their way of discovery. They are Earth Ter (*SagTer*) and Mind Ter (*dGongs-gTer*). The discovery of Earth Ter involves earthly materials such as "symbolic scripts" (*brDa-Yig*)

written on a scroll of paper known as a "yellow scroll" (*Shog-Ser*), and so on. These are to assist the discovery of the concealment or to awaken the memory of the Ter enshrined in the enlightened nature of the mind of the Terton (*gTer-sTon*), the Ter Discoverer. However, people usually conceive that Mind Ter is transmitted through mind but that Earth Ter is something that Tertons discover from earthly objects such as rocks, lakes, and so on. But actually, the symbolic script merely becomes the key, but is neither the real Ter of teachings nor the transmission of the attainment, which comes only from the Terton's mind.

Earth Ter (Sa-gTer)

Concealment of Ter: There are different ways of concealing the Ters, but mostly they involve three stages. First, Guru Padmasambhava transmitted his esoteric teachings and attainments to his disciples and concealed them in their minds' absolute nature. Ordinary mind is changing because of concepts and emotions, but the true nature is changeless and preserves the teachings intact within itself. That is the place where the actual concealment of Ter takes place. The third Dodrupchen writes³:

The ultimate place, the sacred treasure where the wisdom blessing of the vajra-speech is preserved without deterioration through the power of the mind-mandate transmission made by Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), is the sphere of changeless intrinsic nature of the mind of the Terton.

Second, with his consort Yeshey Tshogyal, Guru Padmasambhava put the teachings into "symbolic or coded scripts" in various languages, mostly what is called Dakini language, and wrote them on "yellow scrolls", or on various objects such as images and ritual objects. Because of the power of the "aspirational transmission" of Guru Padmasambhava, the "symbolic script" will have the power to awaken the transmission

when the Terton, the discoverer, reads it. Then the Terton puts the yellow scrolls in a casket and conceals the "casket (*gTser-sGrom*)" in a "place of *Ter* concealment (*gTer-gNas*)" such as rocks, mountains,lakes, temples, images and sky through his or her mystical power, and it becomes invisible until the time of discovery.

Third, Guru Padmasambhava inspires his disciples to be Tertons and gives prophetic blessings concerning when and how her or she will become a Terton. This is not a mere prediction of the future but a blessing which makes the prophesied events happen because of the power of the truth of the master's words.

Discoverer or Terton: It is said that there will be one hundred major Tertons and a thousand minor Tertons. Starting from Sangye Lama (11th century), a great number of Tertons appeared in Tibet and thousands of volumes of teachings and a vast number of religious artifacts were discovered as *Ter*. Even today, since the beginning of the 1980s, the discoveries of *Ter* resumed in Tibet. Tertons are the reincarnations of the disciples of Guru Padmasambhava, and from him they have received the mind-mandate transmission of the teachings and have accomplished high attainments. With the exception of a few Tertons, most of them have been tantriks living at home with families. They transmute their everyday life into the training of the union of bliss and emptiness without discrimination and propagate the teachings discovered by them.

Some of the great Tertons are Nyang Nyina Odzer (1124-1192), Guru Chowang (1212-1270), Ogyen Lingpa (1323- ?), Rigdzin Goddem (1337-1408), Sangye Lingpa (1340-1396), Dorjee Lingpa (1346-1405), Ratna Lingpa (1403-1478), Padma Lingpa (1450- ?), Rigdzin Jatshon Nyingpo (1585-1656), Minling Terdag Lingpa (1646-1714), Rigdzin Jigmed Lingpa (1729-1798), and Khyentse'i Wangpo (1820-1892).

Most of the Tertons, before discovering any *Ter*, seem to be ordinary people. They do not necessarily appear as scholars, meditators or Tulkus. However, due to their inner spiritual attainments and the transmissions thy have received in their past lives, at the appropriate time, they suddenly start discovering mystical *Ters* without the need of any apparent training. At the beginning, sceptics often raise doubts about

discoveries of such unexpected people. In some cases, a Terton's natural directness and honesty may appear as unconventional or even impolite to those who hold conservative values. But gradually, if they are true Ter discoveries, they gain the recognition of higher spiritual authorities and establish the respect of and benefit for the people. It is important to understand this cultural context, otherwise a great Terton might be mistaken for a charlatan. For example, it is unfortunate, that a Western author has recently disclaimed one of the most authentic Tertons of the Nyingmapa tradition of Tibet by using some criticisms made by unqualified contemporaries or made for ulterior motives, and the Terton's own expressions of humility, which are characteristic of Buddhist sages.

Discovery: The following is a description of the common process of Earth Ter discovery, but it is certainly not the only one, for Ters have been discovered in many other ways. First, the Terton receives the "prophetic guide (*Kha-Byang*)" in pure visions, directly or in indications from Guru Padmasambhava, Dakinis or deities. Then he or she performs "the Ter preparatory practices (*gTer-sGrub*)", doing meditations or rituals as instructed in the prophetic guide.

When the time comes, the Terton goes to the concealment place, either alone or with selected followers, such as his or her consort and heart disciples or just onlookers. Many Ter discoveries take place in secret (*gSang-gTer*) and many in public (*Khrom-gTer*). There, while performing "the feast offering ceremony (*Tshogs*)", the discovery takes place in different ways: It may be that the Ter descends from the concealment place into the hands of the Terton at the end of a rainbow beam or that the Terton climbs up the rock, which in ordinary circumstances is too steep to climb, opens a door in the rock and climbs down with the casket, or that the Terton disappears and then reappears with the Ter, or the Terton uses a tool such as a chisel to dig into the rock, and after hard digging takes out the Ter, or the Terton jumps into a lake and brings out the Ter; or sometimes the Terton discovers the Ter from images, temples and from the sky. Sometimes Tertons discover Ters concealed at far distances through their meditative power, without needing to go there, for the Ter protectors bring the

Ters to them.

Among the discovered Ter there are also images, religious objects and ritual tools, but the important ones are the symbolic letters written on yellow scrolls. Most of the scrolls are kept in the sealed Ter caskets made of precious materials, stone, wood and so on.

Again by the performances of more Ter preparatory practices, the Ter casket spontaneously opens and in it the Terton discovers the yellow scroll. It is called "yellow scroll" because most of them are of yellowish or golden colour, but in fact they could be of any colour, length or design. One the yellow scrolls the Tertons find the symbolic scripts in any of various human and non-human scripts and languages such as those of India, Tibet and the Dakini land.

The symbolic scripts are in various characters and they are categorized in three groups: Just visible (*sNang-Tsam*) is one syllable or more, but not necessarily a word. Just a basis (*rTen-Tsam*) is a phrase or a few phrases, a sentence or a few sentences related to the teachings of the text, such as a brief outline of the text, a part of the text, the title of the text or an event linked to the concealment. Sometimes it is a piece of writing unrelated to the subject. Complete text (*mThar-Ch'ag*) is a discovery of the whole text.

The Terton sees, contemplates or unites his naked wisdom, (which is) self-arisen from his innate luminous nature, with the symbolic scripts and thereby awakens the power of Guru Padmasambhava's Vajra speech wisdom, which is concealed in him. He decodes the words in the symbolic scripts (*brDa-bKrol*) and discovers the meaning, the Ter, from them. The discovery of Ter is the arising of the Dharma-treasures of the ultimate sphere (*Ch'os-dByings*) as the power of the intrinsic awareness (*Rig-rTsa*) or the arising of the power of the intrinsic awareness as the teachings.⁴ If you do not have the realization of intrinsic awareness of Dzogpa Chenpo, which pervades the ultimate sphere, you cannot discover a Ter or Guru Padmasambhava, which comes through mind-mandate transmission.

So the symbolic scripts become the key to awaken the memories of the teachings and attainments from the expanse of intrinsic nature of the Terton's mind. Then, after more Ter

preparatory practices, when the Terton sees the signs of the appropriate time, he transcribes the teachings. Thereafter the Terton transmits the teachings to the followers and entrusts them to the chief recipient of the Ter, called the doctrine-holder (*Ch'os-bDag*). Doctrine-holders are mostly people who also have received the transmission of the teaching from Guru Padmasambhava and have taken responsibility for the propagation of the teachings.

Mind Ter: The methods of concealment, transmission and discovery are similar to those of Earth Ter, except that they don't rely on any external earthly source, such as yellow scrolls, as the key to discovery. In many instances of Mind Ter, seeing or hearing symbolic words or sounds in visions causes the discovery of the Ter, but usually the discovery does not rely on any external sources and there is no involvement of earthly objects as the means of discovering the Ter. A Mind Terton discovers the Ter by awakening the mind-mandated transmission spontaneously from the expanse of intrinsic awareness of his mind, when the circumstances have matured and the time has come.

There is a third category of discovered teachings known as Pure Vision (*Dag-sNang*). Pure vision teachings are not Terma. They are merely teachings given by Buddhas, deities and teachers in visions. For this discovery the discoverer does not need to be such a highly realized person, and there is no mind-mandate transmission. However, there are cases in which Ter teachings have been discovered or designated as pure vision teachings, and when that is the case they are in fact Ter teachings.

In the Nyingma literature there are thousands of volumes of Ter texts discovered by hundreds of Tertons starting in the 11th century and continuing to this day. The majority of texts concern Sadhana, ritual, prayer and various esoteric performances (*Las*). There are a great number of texts on philosophy, meditations and the result of Buddhist practice in general and especially of the tantric tradition. Also there are numerous texts on medicine, astrology, history and biography.

It is astonishing to realize the scope and impact of the spiritual treasures conferred by Guru Padmasambhava in order

to improve the value of social, literary and spiritual life of Tibetan society and the offspring of its tradition, for over ten centuries without cessation. And it is shocking to see that even many Tibetans have little awareness of the significance of this tradition. According to Tibetan historians, Buddhism may have never been able to be established in Tibet without the blessings of Guru Padmasambhava. In Tibet there is hardly a single significant mountain, lake or valley which is not blessed by him individually by visiting, meditating, displaying miracles and concealing Ters in them. Even many physical marks such as imprints, spontaneously arisen images or caves of meditation are still visible. The Ter tradition includes some of the most striking evidence of the great imprint left in Tibet for the welfare of the world through the enlightened activities of Guru Padmasambhava. At the time of his departure from Tibet, he expressed is kindness and his promise to the Tibetans in the following words⁵:

When you face the bad times of the dark age,
 Every day and night I will come to Tibet.
 I will come to you riding the rays of the sun, and
 On every 10th of the waxing moon I will come to you in
 person.

Footnotes:

1. *Arya-dharmasamgiti-sutra* ('Phags-Pa Ch'os Thams-chad Yang-Dag-Par Sdud-pa).84b.
2. Las-'Phro gTer-drGyud Kyi rNam-bShad Ngo-mTshar rGya-mTsho by the third Dodrupchen Jigmed Tenpa'i Nyima.
3. Les-'Phro gTer-brGyud Kyi rNam-bShad Nyung-gSal Ngo-mTshar rGya-mTsho by the Third Dodrupchen Rinpoche, 4b/2.
4. Las-'phro gTer-brGyud Kyi rNam-bShad Ngo-mTshar rGya-mTsho by the third Dobrupchen Rinpoche. 30b/4.
5. gSol-'Debs Leu bDun-Ma discovered by Rigidzin Goddem.